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ABSTRACT

The role of state-level goals in providing a framework for assessing the performance of postsecondary education in Georgia is considered. The effort of the Governor's Committee on Postsecondary Education in developing goals and indicators of goal achievement and in analyzing performance is described. The Committee developed a set of goals and objectives, and the reactions of government employees, school and college staff, business and industry representatives, members of occupational and professional associations, and citizens were elicited through survey responses and public hearings. Tentative identification of indicators of how well an objective was achieved was undertaken by five task forces consisting of representatives from the various sectors. From the suggestions, the Committee developed a list of 116 indicators for statewide review. Further refinement was achieved and eight goals were established in the areas of individual development, diversity and accessibility, responsiveness, excellence, effectiveness and efficiency, and public awareness. These were accompanied by 30 objectives and 96 indicators. The strengths of the process pertain to its comprehensiveness and relative objectivity. Additionally, the interrelatedness of various goals, objectives, and indicators can be more easily recognized and considered when assessment activities are based on a comprehensive goals statement. Weaknesses of the approach include the size of the task of making such an assessment and inadequate information to assess certain goals and objectives. Overall, the process is more effective at identifying problems than with coming up with detailed solutions. However, the objective identification of problem areas is a contribution to the problem-solving process. (SW)

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THE USE OF STATE-LEVEL GOALS AS THE BASIS FOR ASSESSING POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION PERFORMANCE

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INTRODUCTION

When I was a community college English instructor, I found one of the serious weaknesses in the writing of many beginning college students was an inability to structure coherently the ideas they wanted to communicate. In many cases, this problem grew out of the fact that they were not really sure themselves what those ideas were. They may have decided that they wanted to write about "my neighborhood," to pick one of the more exciting topics I got to read about, but often they did not know what they wanted to say about it. They had never decided what was the main point about their neighborhood that they wanted to communicate to their readers. And writers that do not know what they want to say will have a hard time saying it coherently.

One of the solutions to this problem is to write a good introductory paragraph. Among other things, the good introductory paragraph, I told my students, needs to tell readers clearly what they are going to be told in the essay -- what the main point is. At least two good reasons exist for doing so. First, it prepares the reader for what is coming in the rest of the essay. Second, and probably more important for many students, it makes sure the writer knows what is supposed to come in the rest of the essay. The introductory paragraph, then, sets a goal both for the readers, telling them what to expect, and for the writer, telling him or her what to do.

Similarly, one hears again and again that, like essays, organizations need goals. Organizations need goals so that their members, especially the leaders, will know what to do through having a clear idea of where the organization is trying to go. Furthermore, they will be able to recognize when they have gotten there. And especially for organizations serving the public -- such as colleges and universities, state systems of higher education, and state governments -- a group exists

that is analagous to the readers of an essay. This group is the public. For this group, goals, as they do for readers, can tell what to expect from the organization. Equally important in recent years, with the rise of accountability, goals can provide the public a means of knowing if the organization is accomplishing what it is intended to do. This paper describes the effort of one state to use goals for this second purpose, specifically, the work in Georgia by the Governor's Commitee on Postsecondary Education.

A 1979 survey by the Georgia Governor's Committee found that in 32 states a state-level agency for postsecondary or higher education reported that their state had developed statewide goals for postsecondary or higher education. Another 11 reported that goals were under development. However, only 12 states reported having set forth specific objectives or subgoals based upon the general goals, and only two had developed specific indicators of, or ways to measure, the achievement of the goals or objectives. The implication of the survey results was that, in nearly all states, statewide goals for postsecondary or higher education served only as ideals and that planning and evaluation in these states was tied, at best, only indirectly to the goals.

Two recent reports have suggested that goals should do more. The 1979 report of the Fifty-sixth American Assembly, The Integrity of Higher Education, recommended that, as one means of combating an erosion of public confidence, "higher education institutions should state their goals explicitly and devise methods for periodic reporting of both their accomplishments and shortcomings to the public as related to these goals" (p. 6). Likewise, the Education Commission of the States' National Task Force on the Accountability of Higher Education (1979) stated that higher education had either to find ways to be more accountable to states or to expect more direct state control. The task force recommended that a comprehensive accountability process should include the setting of goals for higher education, measuring

progress toward meeting those goals, and reporting on that progress to the state. Citing these facts, Morgan (1980) concluded that "the goal development process in many states appears to be incomplete, having failed to follow through in the manner suggested by the ECS task force" (p.5).

The thesis of this paper is that state-level goals for postsecondary education not only should but can do more than serve as ideals; they can also provide a framework for an assessment of postsecondary education performance from a statewide perspective. And in doing so, they can also provide valuable assistance to the institutional research process. To support this thesis, the paper examines the effort in Georgia of the Governor's Committee on Postsecondary Education to use goals in this way -- describing the goal-development process, the development of indicators of goal achievement, and the assessment work and results completed to date. Finally, strengths and weaknesses of the procedure are suggested.

THE PROCESS OF GOAL DEVELOPMENT AND ASSESSMENT

Background

The process grew out of a recommendation made by the Governor's Committee in its first report, Postsecondary Issues: Action Agenda for the Eighties, issued in June 1979 at the end of a year-long study. Among ten issues identified by the Committee as facing Georgia postsecondary education was the lack of a comprehensive statement of postsecondary education goals for the state. The Committee said that such goals would "provide a basis for agreement among the postsecondary institutions and sectors, a focus for concerted action by the state, and criteria against which progress in postsecondary education can be measured" (p. 36). Accordingly, the Committee recommended, "The Governor should take immediate steps to initiate the development of postsecondary education goals for Georgia" (p. 37).

In response, Governor George Busbee (1979) charged the Committee with developing "a set of statewide postsecondary education goals which respond to the needs of the people of our state." He also directed the Committee to identify ways to measure progress toward achievement of the goals. Lastly, he commissioned the group to begin an assessment of where the state stands in relation to the goals and to recommend "what steps need to be taken to close the gaps between were we are and where we need to be" (p. 3).

Goal Development

The Committee began the task of developing goals in September 1979. Defining its task, the group first decided it would develop both goals and objectives. Goals would be the broad statements of ideals or aspirations, stating the desired conditions that should exist in Georgia postsecondary education or should result from postsecondary education. To bridge the gap between goals and the assessment of goal achievement, each goal would be accompanied by objectives. The objectives for a particular goal would state more specifically the desired conditions which, when taken together, would add up to the goal itself. By being more specific and more limited, the objectives would be more amenable to the assessment of the degree to which they were being achieved.

At an initial meeting the Committee head from representatives of all sectors of Georgia postsecondary education and of the legislature, as well as experts from other states, about goal needs and the goal-setting process. In addition, the Committee staff reported on its survey of the work of other states in developing goals, objectives, and achievement indicators. With this information, each Committee member developed suggested goals and objectives independently, and then the Committee met and drew these ideas together into an initial draft.

This draft was circulated to persons invited to participate on "reaction panels." These panels -- representing the various levels of institutions in all postsecondary sectors, business and industry, the legislature, state agencies and boards, student organizations, and business groups -- met with the Committee and suggested modifications relative to the concerns of their particular constituencies.

Reacting to these suggestions, the Committee developed a revised set of goals and objectives. This set was distributed in survey form to nearly 1,400 Georgians, representing state government, local government, postsecondary education, elementary and secondary education, business and industry, occupational and professional associations, consumers, and other citizen groups. The survey recipients were asked to judge the importance of each goal and objective and to suggest additions and changes. At the same time, seven regional public hearings were held to provide an opportunity for dialogue on the goals and objectives. Approximately 350 people attended the hearings, with 113 making specific comments to the Committee. Based on this input, in December 1979 the Committee prepared a new draft, consisting of nine goals accompanied by 42 objectives.

Indicator Development

Using this draft, the process of identifying indicators of goal and objective achievement was begun. An indicator was defined as a type of information or data that, when obtained, would provide evidence indicating how well an objective, and thus a goal, was being achieved. It was assumed that most objectives would need several indicators to provide a reasonably rounded assessment of progress made toward achievement. On the other hand, some indicators might relate to more than one objective.

The job of tentatively identifying indicators was assigned to five Task Forces, each consisting of about ten persons representing education, business, government, and various citizen groups and chaired by a Committee member. At least one Committee

staff member and a resource person from an education-related organization (such as the College Board or the Southern Regional Education Board) worked with each group. Each Task Force was charged with identifying indicators for the objectives related to one to three goals. The Task Forces were also instructed that they could suggest changes in the goals and objectives, although they should identify indicators based upon the goals and objectives as currently stated.

In March, the Task Forces submitted 208 indicators for Committee consideration. From these ideas, the Committee developed a list of 116 indicators for statewide review. By means of a survey and two public hearings, over 300 persons who had previously provided input into the development of the goals were asked to react to the appropriateness of the proposed indicators.

Based on the reactions received, the Committee developed its final statement of goals, objectives, and indicators, which were presented to the Governor and the public in the Committee's June 1980 report, Georgia Postsecondary Education in the Eighties: Goals and Objectives. Eight goals were set forth, in the areas of individual development, diversity and accessibility, responsiveness, excellence, effectiveness and efficiency, and public awareness. They were accompanied by 30 objectives and 96 indicators. For example, in the area of responsiveness, the following was stated:

Goal: Responsiveness by postsecondary education to changing needs of individuals and society.

Objective a: Instructional, research, and service programs that adequately respond to changing individual and societal needs.

Indicators:

1. Extent of success of graduates in finding appropriate employment.
2. Results of follow-up studies of graduates and employers.

3. Existence of systematic procedures for identifying and meeting emerging needs through instruction, research, and service programs.

4. Extent of unfilled job requests.

5. Evidence of students leaving state for programs not offered in Georgia.

6. Migration rates of college-bound National Merit Scholars.

Objective b: State, agency, and institutional policies that allow and encourage postsecondary education to respond to changing educational needs.

Indicator:

1. Inventory of policies and regulations that institutions believe encourage or restrict responsiveness.

Objective c: Opportunities for students, employers, and other users of postsecondary education services to influence the planning of postsecondary education programs.

Indicators:

1. Existence of systematic procedures for user input at institutional, community, regional, and state levels.

2. Perceptions of students, employers, and users of the impact of their input.

Assessment

At the same time it was issuing its report, the Committee began the more unique portion of its work -- assessing the performance of Georgia postsecondary education relative to the goals and objectives. The apparent uniqueness of the proposed task was that an evaluative study of the performance of postsecondary education in a state was to be based directly on a statement of goals and objectives. Such an approach would seem to be a logical, virtually an inherent extension of the act of developing goals; yet, in practice, it has not been so. Almost universally,

it seems, state-level postsecondary education goals have been treated as ideals -- obligatory statements that must be made, but that can and should play only the most limited role in guiding the real-world work of making or advising on decisions affecting a state's postsecondary education community. Treating goals in this way would appear analogous to writing an introductory paragraph and then writing the rest of the essay two weeks later without rereading the introduction: The main body of such an essay will surely have some relationship to the introduction, but that relationship will likely not be very close. As a result, the coherency of the essay will probably suffer. The Committee, then, wanted its goals and objectives to do more.

To assist it in this stage of its work, the Committee asked 21 persons who had served on the indicators task forces to come together to advise it on the design of the assessment. A basic recommendation of this advisory group was that the Committee not try to assess all the goals at once, but focus initially on a limited number. Accordingly, the Committee decided to focus its first-year efforts primarily on areas which dealt with citizen opportunities for postsecondary education in Georgia -- especially the appropriateness of the range of opportunities, their availability, and public knowledge of them. Specifically, the assessment covered all or part of 11 objectives under six goals. With this limitation set, the next step was to determine exactly what information would be obtained and the means of doing so.

Ultimately, the Committee conducted a small number of surveys of public, private, and proprietary institutions and of other agencies and organizations. In addition, several surveys of value to the Committee were carried out by doctoral students in the University of Georgia's Institute of Higher Education. However, the Committee attempted to minimize the burden on institutions, as well as maximize the productivity of its own staff and resources, by utilizing information already collected by other

organizations whenever possible even though doing so sometimes meant using less than ideal data. For example, data were obtained from the National Center for Education Statistics, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia, the Georgia Departments of Education and Labor, the College Board, and the Veterans Administration, among others.

When the information relating to a particular objective had been obtained, the Committee staff would prepare an "assessment report," describing in detail the findings and proposed conclusions. Ten such reports were prepared. (One of the reports covered two objectives.) After an initial review by the Committee, each report was sent to about 40 "outside reviewers," including members of the assessment advisory group and the related indicators task force and a number of other postsecondary education leaders in the state. With the input of these reviewers, the Committee revised each assessment report and developed tentative recommendations for action in assessment areas where achievement was concluded to be unsatisfactory.

After completion of the ten assessment reports, a year-end report was drafted summarizing the assessment findings and conclusions and presenting Committee recommendations. This draft was also sent to outside reviewers, who were invited to respond in writing or personally before the Committee. With final revisions to the text and recommendations, the report, Georgia Postsecondary Education: Where We Are and Where We Need to Be, was adopted by the Committee in September 1981. A total of 22 recommendations were made for improving the performance of postsecondary education in Georgia.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE PROCESSS

The Question

As described in the introduction, the thesis of this paper is that state-level goals for postsecondary education can do more than serve as ideals; rather, they

can provide a framework for an assessment of postsecondary education performance from a statewide perspective. The process followed by the Governor's Committee on Postsecondary Education to do this in Georgia has been described. The important questions remain. Did it really work? Or, to avoid having to answer a yes-or-no question: What strengths and weaknesses were found to exist in the process?

Strengths

The strengths of the process would seem to flow from its comprehensiveness and relative objectivity. By being based on an established and comprehensive statement of state-level goals and objectives for postsecondary education, the assessment of postsecondary education performance avoided problems that may arise when assessment efforts are focused on a small number of isolated topics.

For one thing, the process followed called for more questions to be answered than would be the case with an assessment of a limited number of selected topics. Thus, the public can be more confident that the state is effectively monitoring whether postsecondary education is fulfilling its purposes. It is more difficult for certain interest groups to claim that the wrong questions are being asked and that some concerns are being ignored because the process placed less reliance on subjective prejudgement by agency boards or staffs of what topics warrant indepth study. Rather, evidence was brought to bear on the achievement or lack of it in a wide range of concerns.

As a result, the process of identifying problem areas was less liable to be short-circuited by existing "myths" regarding how well certain aims are being achieved. For example, in the area of public awareness of available postsecondary education opportunities, a number of pro[illegible] existed in the state to promote such awareness. Consequently, many, if not necessarily all, parties involved in this area believed the Committee goal on public awareness was largely being achieved. However, the

assessment in this area revealed important gaps in the public availability of information on educational programs offered by institutions in the state, and a much greater consensus was achieved among relevant decision-makers that additional effort was needed if the goals were going to be achieved. Four specific actions were recommended by the Committee, and portions of these have already been implemented. It seems unlikely that these needs would have received sufficient recognition to spur action if a comprehensive assessment of goals had not taken place.

Not only can problems be recognized that would have otherwise been ignored, but also the myth that a problem exists can be "demythed." For example, a feeling that private institutions in the state were generally "in trouble" was bolstering the arguments or proponents of increased non-needs-based state subsidies to students attending private colleges, subsidies that already account for the majority of state student-financial-aid dollars. The assessment found that the health of private institutions in the state had improved considerably since 1972 and was still on the upswing. Thus, it was shown that this aspect of the goal on diversity of opportunities was indeed being achieved, contrary to what many people believed. Therefore, the Committee was able to conclude that the state program of subsidizing private college students was contributing to the achievement of the goal. In addition, it was able to recommend to the legislature that the program be maintained, but that increases beyond its current level relative to per-student state support of public colleges did not appear warranted. This recommendation was also supported by findings in another assessment area which revealed that private college students who applied for financial aid on the basis of need actually had, on the average, a greater portion of their need met by aid than did public college students who applied. Again, these findings may well have never been brought to light had an assessment based on a comprehensive set of goals and objectives not been carried out.

The example just described also points out another strength revealed by the goals-assessment process: The interrelatedness of various goals, objectives, and indicators can be more easily recognized and taken into account when assessment activities are based on a comprehensive goals statement. Thus, findings on financial aid developed for the assessment of an objective under the goal on equitable opportunity provided an extra but key dimension to the assessment of an objective under the goal on diversity. In many cases, such relationships might not be recognized if state-level assessment activities were conducted only in selected specific areas rather than being a part of a comprehensive effort.

In addition, a comprehensive goals assessment effort increases the visibility of stated goals and objectives for postsecondary education and thus can increase internally initiated activities by institutions and agencies to increase goal achievement. Following the commencement of the activities of the Governor's Committee, state agencies governing public colleges and public vocational-technical schools increased their planning efforts. In some cases, Committee activities clearly served as a catalyst for these heightened efforts. It seems reasonable to conclude that, when the achievement of goals is examined, those goals take on increased importance and become more than ideals perceived to have little relationship to real-world activities.

At the institutional level, goals and the results of goals assessment can assist institutional researchers by helping them identify, and assess the achievement of, institutional goals by clarifying their understanding of state-level concerns and revealing problem areas amenable to further study at the institutional level. For example, the Committee concluded that, in general, educational and career counseling activities at colleges were not effective enough; however, it was not in a position to recommend specific solutions to institutions. Rather of necessity the buck was passed to the colleges and universities; and while the information obtained

in the assessment will be helpful to institutions in examining the area, further work must be carried out by institutional staff to determine whether the problem exists at their institution and, if so, what the specific dimensions of the problem are and what solutions are available.

Weaknesses

Unfortunately, it is not possible to say that the process of using state-level goals to assess postsecondary education performance was without weaknesses.

First, the size of the task of making such an assessment was found to be a problem. Early staff projections of the amount of work involved turned out to be very low compared to the amount ultimately required. A task first planned to last six months is now barely half completed after over a year of work. Of course, the Committee was limited by the size of its staff and its access to data-processing facilities. Presumably, larger agencies would be able to move more quickly as long as they were careful to maintain limits on the level of detail addressed in such an assessment. Furthermore, once completed, the assessment effort goes a long way toward identifying a more feasible schedule of future reassessment activities, by indicating what the information needs are and how often certain types of data should be collected. Thus, many areas where achievement is found to be high will need reassessment, and thus data collection, much more infrequently than high-priority and problem areas.

Second, information needed to assess adequately certain goals and objectives was not always available or feasibly obtainable. For example, while the Committee was able to determine that a desirably diverse set of educational opportunities was available to Georgians, it was not able to tell satisfactorily how well that diversity matched the needs of the state and its citizens. This effort was confounded by limitations in the information available on postsecondary education programs offered in the state and on the demand for programs by prospective students and for

program graduates by employers. Thus, the information could not be refined in a way to allow vital comparisons to be made.

Discovering such limitations, however , can be valuable in that it enables decision-makers to have a realistic picture of what approaches, objective or subjective or both, must be taken in making policy decisions. Furthermore, recommendations can be made and considered, as happened in this example, about the establishment, expansion, or refinement of various data sources.

Finally, another weakness of the process was that it did not turn out to be as "exciting" as some persons had expected. Of necessity, state-level goals and the assessment of performance relative to those goals must be at a general level. As a result, the products of such a process are often not concrete or detailed enough to grab people's attention. For example, when the Committee concluded, in its current report, that "the effectiveness of career planning and career placement services in public and private colleges needs to be improved," some reviewers of the report were unhappy that the causes of that ineffectiveness were not identified and that specific solutions were not recommended. Perhaps these questions should be addressed by a state-level study; however, doing so would seem to represent a major separate project rather than a portion of a general assessment of goal achievement. Overall, then, the process was more effective at identifying problems than with coming up with detailed solutions. Nonetheless, the strength of the process in identifying objectively the areas where problems lie would seem to contribute to the ultimate development of solutions, and to the cost-effectiveness of doing so, by enabling the detailed studies required to be concentrated in areas where the need is clearly recognized.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, I believe the process proved to be valuable. Its effectiveness in doing what it was designed to do -- reveal how well postsecondary education as

a whole is doing those things expected of it -- would seem to outweigh its weaknesses. However, it seems best suited for an established state-level coordinating or planning agency that does not have to "excite" people to ensure its continuance. For the established agency, the process can provide a clear guide to asking and answering the questions central to its work. Likewise, it can help institutional researchers to identify research topics that respond to state-level concerns, complementing their efforts in areas of concern that are institution-specific.

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